

POE, EDGAR ALLAN

POE, EDGAR ALLAN (1809-1849), was one of America's greatest poets, short-story writers, and literary critics. "The Raven" is one of the best-known poems in American literature, and an example of the haunting quality of many of Poe's works. With "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and other short stories, Poe became the father of modern mystery and detective fiction. "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Masque of the Red Death," and other such tales made him a fore-runner of symbolism, impressionism, and the grotesque in modern literature. "The Poetic Principle," the "Marginalia," and his reviews contain important principles of literary criticism, which, together with his poetry and fiction, influenced many later writers, including T. S. Eliot, André Gide, James Joyce, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and three generations of French poets.

For many years, critics disagreed on Poe's place in literature. Up to World War I, he was admired mainly for his romantic lyric poems, his tales of terror, and his clever detective stories. Since that time, scholars have become more concerned with Poe's symbolic poems and tales—those in which mystery, atmosphere, and extraordinary events and characters represent the interplay of conflicting feelings and values.

Poe's Life

Since his death, more books have been published on Poe than on any other American author. The mystery of Poe the man and the artist has fascinated biographers. Poe was hounded by economic troubles, hurt by his enemies, and haunted by nightmares and visions. Yet out of the very frustrations and failures of his personal life came his artistic successes.

Early Life. Poe was born in Boston on Jan. 19, 1809. His father deserted the family and his mother died before Poe was three years old. John Allan, a tobacco exporter in Richmond, Va., and his wife Frances raised Poe as a foster child, but never legally adopted him. From 1815 to 1820, the family lived in England, and Poe attended a private school near London, where he did well in his studies.

In 1826, Poe entered the University of Virginia, where he was an excellent student. But because his foster father sent him barely enough money to live, Poe gambled to try to win money for books and clothing. His resulting debts caused Allan to withdraw him from the university. Allan then wanted Poe to study law, but Poe determined to follow a literary career. After the two quarreled in March, 1827, Poe left home for Boston, where he later enlisted in the Army as "Edgar A. Perry."

By the time he was honorably discharged in 1829, he had attained the rank of sergeant major. He then moved to Baltimore to live with his aunt, Mrs. Maria Clemm, and her daughter, Virginia. In 1830, Poe entered the U.S. Military Academy in a final effort to gain Allan's good will. But Frances Allan had died in 1829 and when Allan decided to remarry in 1830, Poe concluded he would never be reconciled with Allan or receive an inheritance. So he deliberately broke regulations to force his dismissal from West Point.

Early Literary Career. Poe's career began with two volumes of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827) and *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* (1829).

Poems (1831), included three of his best works—"Helen," "The City in the Sea," and "Israfel." Discouraged by lack of recognition, he started writing short stories. The first five were published in 1832.

In 1833, Poe's story "MS. Found in a Bottle" won a \$50 prize and the friendship of John P. Kennedy, novelist and lawyer. Kennedy helped Poe get a job with the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which Poe edited so that subscriptions increased from 500 to over 3,500. On May 16, 1836, Poe married his cousin Virginia Clemm, who was then not quite 14 years old. As he could not support his wife and aunt on a salary of \$10 a week, he resigned from the magazine and moved to New York City early in 1837.

Midcareer. Poe's most productive period as a fiction writer and critic extended from 1837 to 1845. He spent 18 months in New York City, and published his only novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) during that time. Poe moved to Philadelphia in 1838, and edited two magazines there. Despite his success as an editor and writer, however, he was so underpaid that he and his family often went without enough food.

In Philadelphia, Poe wrote significant reviews of the works of Longfellow and Hawthorne. Some of his greatest tales appeared in a collection of his first 25 stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840). But this brought him neither important recognition nor money.

From 1844 until his death, Poe lived in New York City. During the mid-1840's, he wrote and edited as much as 15 hours a day and enjoyed a growing reputation as a short-story writer. His tale "The Gold-Bug" (1843) sold 300,000 copies. In many ways, 1845 was his best year—12 stories published in *Tales* and 30 poems in *The Raven and Other Poems*. "The Raven" brought him his greatest recognition. Also in 1845, James Russell Lowell wrote the first essay-length appreciation of Poe as a writer. He praised Poe as "the most discriminating, philosophical and fearless critic upon imaginative work who has written in America."

The Tragic Period. The last years of Poe's life were marked by tragedy. His wife died of tuberculosis in 1847 after five years of illness. This "intolerable sorrow" led Poe to occasional drinking to ease his despair. His drinking, or gossip about it, sometimes spoiled his chances to get or hold a job. But according to his business associates, Poe was usually sober, responsible, courteous, and hard-working. His drinking troubles were largely due to a low tolerance for any kind of alcohol. Contrary to what some persons believe, he was neither a habitual drunkard nor a drug addict.

In 1849, Poe became engaged to marry the widowed Mrs. Sarah Royster Shelton, his boyhood sweetheart. On his way to bring Mrs. Clemm to the wedding, Poe stopped in Baltimore, probably on September 28. There are various theories about the events of the next few days. All that is known is that Poe was found lying out-

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Short stories
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...a voting place on October 3. He died in a hospital days later, without regaining consciousness. The cause of his death remains unknown.

Poe's Works

Fiction. Poe's most popular tales are filled with an atmosphere of the strange, the bizarre, and the terrible. He insisted that these tales of terror were an expression of psychological and moral realities, rather than of sensationalism for its own sake. Many of Poe's stories are called "moral allegories" because the theme of moral responsibility prevails in them.

For example, "The Fall of the House of Usher," perhaps Poe's best story, concerns the twins Roderick and Madeline Usher. When Madeline falls into a trance, Roderick buries her in a deep vault, thinking she is dead. He represents the overrefined intellect and his twin sister the suppressed moral self. In this story and others, such as "Morella" and "Ligeia," Poe means that man cannot separate his moral self from his intellect without destroying himself. In "William Wilson," the hero, by killing his double, his conscience, destroys himself. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator has a compulsion to kill and later to confess his murder. "The Cask of Amontillado" and "Hop-Frog" deal with murder as revenge. Poe wrote of the inhumanity of man in "The Pit and the Pendulum," the dark and silent indifference of the universe in "Shadow" and "Silence," and the triumph of time and death over human folly and pride in "The Masque of the Red Death."

Poe's character C. Auguste Dupin, a private detective, became the model for many later fictional detectives. Dupin appeared in three stories. "The Purloined Letter" is a suspenseful story noted for its characterization and its economy of plot and style. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," Dupin's imagination as well as his powers of careful observation enable him to solve the crimes.

Poetry. Despite its theatrical effects and stylistic excess, "The Raven" is Poe's best-known poem and one of the most famous works in American literature. The theme of "The Raven"—the narrator's grief over the loss of an ideal love—recurs in other of Poe's works. This poem has a dramatic intensity that makes the hypnotic monotony of rhythm and tone a realistic reflection of the speaker's state of mind.

"To Helen," "Ulalume," and "For Annie" also dramatize deep-felt loyalty to a woman who symbolizes ideal, spiritual value. These poems are noted for their use of rhyme, rhythm, symbols, and psychology. They show Poe's ability to use rhythmic and tonal qualities that reinforce ideas and subconscious feelings. In "The Valley of Unrest" and "Sonnet—To Science," Poe described man's loss of innocence and sense of wonder and beauty. In "Lenore," "Anna Lee," and "Eldorado," Poe implies that only love, duty, or aspiration can save man from despair.

Essays and Criticism. Poe's critical thought was influenced by his career as a magazine journalist. He is the magazine article to be the literary form most responsive to the need for "the curt, the condensed, the pointed, the readily diffused." From 1844 to 1849, Poe published a number of jottings and short essays in various journals. These "Marginalia," as well as

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scattered reviews and letters, contain some of Poe's basic ideas on the nature of man, society, democracy, reform, and literature. His long essay *Eureka* (1848) tries to explain the riddle of the universe—its origin, expansion, and ultimate destiny. This work is a primary source for understanding his poetic view of matter, spirit, space, and the interrelationship of God and man.

"The Poetic Principle," first a lecture and then an essay published in 1850, best states Poe's ideas of poetry. His reviews of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* express Poe's finest insights into the nature of originality, allegory, and the short story.

Poe believed that the ideal critic should be objective, analytical, and, if necessary, unhesitatingly negative. He insisted that criticism should deal with qualities of beauty, not with history, biography, or philosophy. By the "Didactic Heresy," Poe meant that beauty was incompatible with any deliberate moralizing or instruction. He believed that truth and fact should have only a hidden or submerged place in a poem, indirectly suggested rather than explicitly stated. In "The Philosophy of Composition," in order to offset the notion that all poetry is composed by pure inspiration, a "species of fine frenzy," Poe exaggerated the role of the poet's conscious control of his creative process.

Introduction to Poe: A Thematic Reader (1967) by Eric W. Carlson is one of the many books on Poe's life and works.

ERIC W. CARLSON

POET LAUREATE, *LAW ree ayt*, is the title given to the outstanding or official poet of a state or nation. The name usually refers to the poet laureate of Great Britain. The United States does not have a poet laureate, but about half of the states do.

The British poet laureate is the official poet of the king or queen. He is expected to write odes praising persons or events on special occasions. He belongs to the royal household, and receives a modest income.

In England during the Middle Ages, universities gave the title to poets. Early English court poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400) and Edmund Spenser (1552?-1599) were also called *laureates*. But Ben Jonson (1573?-1637) is considered the first poet laureate in the modern sense. His successor, William Davenant (1606-1668), was the first poet laureate officially appointed by the king.

CHARLES W. COOPER

POETS LAUREATE

Name	Born	Appointed	Died
*Sir William Davenant	1606	1638	1668
*John Dryden	1631	1668	1700
Thomas Shadwell	1642?	1688	1692
Nahum Tate	1652	1692	1715
Nicholas Rowe	1674	1715	1718
Laurence Eusden	1688	1718	1730
Colley Cibber	1671	1730	1757
William Whitehead	1715	1758	1785
Thomas Warton	1728	1785	1790
Henry James Pye	1745	1790	1813
*Robert Southey	1774	1813	1843
*William Wordsworth	1770	1843	1850
*Alfred, Lord Tennyson	1809	1850	1892
Alfred Austin	1835	1896	1913
*Robert Bridges	1844	1913	1930
*John Masefield	1878	1930	1967
Cecil Day-Lewis	1904	1968	

*Has a separate biography in WORLD BOOK.